

1867-2000: A people's history of Mexico



A working class history of Mexico from the Diaz administration of 1876, through the Revolution of 1910 to the beginning of the 21st century.

The Revolution was the period which saw the Mexican state begin its transformation from an oligarchical-landowners' government to the one-party corporatist model which survived for so long

The Mexican Revolution is crucial to understanding the peculiar social base from which the Mexican state is constructed, with its formal recuperation of worker and peasant organisations, and its need to regularly embark upon sprees of revolutionary rhetoric.



Porfirio Diaz

The latifundias

The Porfiriato, the administration of Porfirio Diaz, ruled Mexico from 1876 to 1910. Its

social base was the latifundistas, the large landowners, and it was their class interests that were transmitted through the government. The rapid industrialisation that Mexico was undergoing at the turn of the twentieth century was confined to tiny areas of the country, and the industrial bourgeoisie as a class were too weak to make much political headway in the Porfiriato. The large estates originated from the fallout of the Reform War, which had ended in 1867. The victorious Liberal wing of the ruling class intended to create a limited system of small landholdings that would be constructed mainly from confiscated Church property and the expropriated communal land of Indians. But almost as soon as these smallholdings came into existence they were aggressively acquired by a new breed of landowner (the latifundista), the smallholder generally being unable to exist solely on his land. These smallholders became either poorly-paid seasonal day-labourers or debt-peons, little more than slaves. In the southern and central areas of Mexico, the latifundistas further expanded their property by violently evicting peasants (campesinos) from their ejidos (communal production units).

Faced with widespread resistance, the landowners organised the paramilitary Guardias Blancas (White Guards). The fact that these brutal armed groups have been a constant part of rural life ever since indicates that the peasants have never admitted defeat in the land war, and the landowners know it.

The latifundias, which were usually centred on a lavish, European-style hacienda and mainly grew sugar, coffee, cotton and India rubber to be exported abroad. As well as serving the needs of the internal market, these were the sources of wealth for the landowning classes. And if the international trade cycle contracted, the latifundia could easily withdraw into limited, or even subsistence, production.

On many haciendas the landowners paid their workers in produce, or forced them to purchase from an employer's shop. Via this payment in kind campesinos usually ended up in debt, and as a result of this dependency, the campesino became a peon, tied forever to the hacienda. Debts were also passed on from father to son, but if a campesino attempted to escape, the Guardias Blancas would follow.



Revolutionary - Emiliano Zapata

Zapatismo and the Ayala Plan

By 1911, revolt was breaking out in the north and centre of Mexico, triggered by the corruption of the Porfiriato and the violence of the landowners. In the countryside, the peasant uprising took the form of land seizures. The Zapatista movement (named after one of its leaders, the anarchist [Emiliano Zapata](#)) was the highpoint of these years. The campesinos of Morelos and Puebla constructed not only a revolutionary army; they also produced, in the Ayala Plan, a coherent political programme that asserted their needs against those of capital. The Ayala Plan spelled out in detail the Zapatista programme of land redistribution: broadly, expropriation of private land for public utility, dispossessed individuals and communities, with a guarantee of protection for small landholdings. The Plan was both a codification of what was already happening and a fillip to further land takeovers. Landlords, Mexican and foreign, were fleeing in their thousands.

With the landowners chased out of Morelos, the Zapatistas attempted to place limits on the future possibility of small capitalist accumulation.

The end of the Morelos Commune

The Zapatistas committed a key error, however, which was to lead to the smashing of their stronghold, the Morelos Commune, by the reconstituted power of the state. While the revolutionary campesino was everywhere, they were unable as a class to move beyond their localist perspective. The Ayala Plan was the most sophisticated attempt to intervene on a national level - yet it talked about the land and nothing else. They completely ignored the urban working class.

The revolutionary peasants who in December 1914 occupied Mexico City were undoubtedly one of the highest expressions of class struggle in the world at that time. The workers of Europe were drowning in their own blood in World War I and the Russian Revolution was still three years away. By contrast, the whole of Mexico was at the peasants' feet. The national power of the capitalist class was smashed and its survivors had retreated to the

eastern port of Veracruz. However, refusing a political solution from within themselves, and trusting that military strength alone would prevail, they inadvertently left the door open to a weak but reconstituting state power.

The working class

Individually, many miners, railwaymen and textile workers joined the revolutionary peasant Northern Division, which had entered into a de facto alliance with the Zapatista Southern Liberation Army. As a class, however, and despite a huge strike wave in 1906, they remained quiet until 1915.

The peasant armies which had occupied Mexico City had failed to inspire working class support, or indeed relate to them in any way. As a result, in exchange for union concessions from the revolutionary capitalist class, the reformist federation of unions, the Casa del Obrero Mundial (COM) agreed to form 'Red Battalions' to fight the Northern Division and the Zapatistas. Although this decision did not go unopposed - the electricians' union refused to abide by the pact - the Red Battalions fought alongside what were known as the Constitutionalist armies throughout 1915. Yet only a year later the working class was paying the price for this complicity. The new bourgeoisie, having beaten off the threat from the peasants, no longer needed the unions. COM headquarters was stormed by troops and unionists across the country arrested. The following year, 1916, the first general strike in Mexican history was crushed. Despite this, however, the power of the organised working class remained formidable.

The 1917 Constitution

Just like the Revolution, the 1917 Constitution is a vital touchstone in Mexican life, a document that came into existence as a result of prolonged struggle, and is still held in high regard today by many sections of the working class and peasantry. The capitalist class clearly intended the new set of state rules to be a signal that the years of chaos and civil war were over and a new cycle of accumulation could begin.

Knowing the erosion of the gains of the Revolution would only be tolerated to a degree by the peasants and the working class, the new bourgeoisie institutionalised itself as the revolutionary party-state, marginalising competing currents within its own class by mobilising popular opinion. It is the evolution of this party-state, in the form of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional, the Party of the Institutional Revolution (PRI), that accounts for the lack of parliamentary democracy in Mexico, and explains the concentration of power in the hands of one man, the President. Despite many knocks this specific formation of the bourgeoisie survived - just - the twentieth century.

In the advanced capitalist countries, the illusion of alternatives through democracy is at the centre of the reproduction and expansion of the capitalist mode of production. Democracy mediates between competing interests within the ruling class, while at the same time countering tendencies towards corruption in the relation between state and capital. In Mexico, there is a hole where this mediation might exist - a hole that is instead plugged by the extraordinary way in which workers' and peasants' organisations have been formally co-opted by the state.

Radical social democracy to the rescue

It was not until 1931 that labour's representatives were fully incorporated into the state. This acceptance of the working class as the working class, as a potentially antagonistic class who must be brought into the fold to neutralise their revolutionary impulses, is the basis of the social democracy the Mexican bourgeoisie utilised for decades.

With its proximity to, and integration with, US capital, Mexico was profoundly affected by the Wall Street Crash. By 1934 the bourgeoisie had comprehensively failed to restore stable

class relations for the accumulation of capital. Exacerbated by the Depression and the militant response of both the peasantry and the proletariat, revolutionary change from below was once more on the agenda.

Most individual Mexican capitalists recognised the objectively higher level of class struggle. The nightmare of 1914 haunted them more than ever and so they implemented a radical solution.

The resultant radicalised form of social democracy came via Lázaro Cárdenas, President from 1934-40. His first and most important task was to sign a pact with the new CGOCM (Confederation of Workers and Peasants). By 1935 half of all Mexico's organised workers were in CGOCM and strikes were going through the roof. Cárdenas immediately recognised the right to strike, poured money into CGOCM patronage and shifted the sympathy of the state's labour relations boards away from the employer and towards the unions. In 1936 CGOCM was renamed the CTM (Confederation of Mexican Workers) and recognised as the official national labour movement. The highpoint of the radical social democratic project came in 1938, with Cárdenas' nationalisation of the largely US-owned oil industry. Cárdenas manipulated the enthusiasm for this measure to generate a spirit of 'national unity', which he then used to crush the insurgent workers' movement.

It was not only the cities the radical party-state had to attend to in order to prevent social revolution breaking out. The countryside had ignited and sustained the Revolution, and could do so again. Cárdenas' solution was a massive redistribution of land the like of which social democracy in Mexico has not been compelled to repeat. Naturally only the worst land was parcelled out - the property and interests of the hacendados left intact. While the Cárdenas reforms appeared impressive, for the vast majority their small patch was unsustainable and seasonal wage-labour unavoidable. The ultimate result of the land reforms was marginalisation for the many, a new network of small competitive farming for some, and the consolidation of the lumbering latifundias.

In fact Cárdenas had mobilised the working class in part to discipline those recalcitrant sections of the capitalist class who needed to be saved from themselves. After 1940 the bourgeoisie as a whole accepted the necessity of state intervention. Even more crucially, any revolutionary movement from below could be mediated through the now-reliable CTM or the new CNC (National Campesino Confederation). As part of the party-state, these organisations could deliver certain concessions, defuse worker and peasant anger through nationalist channels and turn a blind eye to repression if it was needed. The state had solved the crisis it had been mired in since the fall of the Porfiriato, and it has followed the same model until very recently: one party guaranteeing social democracy - peace between the officially-recognised antagonistic classes. Unlike the West, it has not needed the shield of formal bourgeois democracy to do so.

The economy after 1940

Mexico had always relied on America for heavy industrial investment, and while US capital may not consciously have wanted to keep Mexico underdeveloped, it saw it generally as fit only for natural resource and labour-power exploitation.

Mexico did, though, industrialise rapidly after 1940. Investment in infrastructure was the province of the state. Petroleum, rail and communications sectors were all under state control, and the state generally carried out economic development which the private sector thought too risky. The resources of the state were augmented by huge foreign investment. Mexico has always been a natural first stop for America's foreign-bound surplus value; now it flooded over the border as a result of the post-war boom.

By the 1960s, Mexico had been enjoying its economic 'miracle' for some time. GDP had risen on average 6-7% annually. Profit flowed into state coffers, paying for an unofficial welfare state of sorts. However social inequality was reaching new extremes. By 1969 the proportion of national income going to the poorest half of the population was only 15%. In rural areas, as agricultural mechanisation increased and productive land was concentrated, the number of un- or underemployed was going up. Some, seeking to refuse proletarianisation, moved away from the agricultural heartlands and attempted to chip out a living from barely cultivable land. Many moved to the cities to join the reserve army of unemployed and effectively kept factory and workshop wages down; some became rural migrant workers and others crossed the border into the US.[\[1\]](#)

In the towns and cities even the organised industrial proletariat suffered from low wages. Their union organisation militated for higher wages, yet this was offset by the absolute corruption of the charros (union bureaucrats), who would often swipe their members' dues. More than anything being in a strong union meant a guarantee of a job, a buttress against unemployment.

However, for the 'pillars of society', those sections of the population incorporated into the party-state, the costs of the reproduction of labour were paid, after a fashion - by the 'PRI welfare state'. It is difficult to quantify, but the far-reaching web of the PRI guaranteed an existence for those sections of society it needed to perpetuate itself. Whether it be official (wage rises) or unofficial (backhanders, protection or the elimination of a rival), it all had to be paid for. The corruption of the PRI welfare state has certainly retarded the efficiency of Mexican industry, prompting many members of the bourgeoisie to defect to the PAN (National Action Party), the pro-business Catholic party set up in the 1930s to oppose the Cardenist reforms.

The 1959 movements

1958-59 saw a sustained offensive by the proletariat over both wage levels and the control of union charros.[\[2\]](#) It is difficult to know to what extent working class activity was self-organised or led by left-wing political parties. The Communist Party was certainly influential but the fact that it was banned from 1946 to 1977 meant that following them led to an immediate challenge to the law of the land. The 1959 movements led frequently to violent confrontation with the state.

Capital also reacted to 1959. Wary of the working class's proven power over the railways, much investment now shifted into air freight and automobile production to begin a new round of accumulation - and struggle.



Massacre - the army killed 500 and wounded thousands

Mexico's '68

By the late '60s the inability of the PRI to reform and democratise itself was apparent to many sections of society, and was a major contributing factor to the student revolt of 1968. These students were determined to rejuvenate the egalitarianism of the 1917 Constitution. The movement, in its concentrated phase of July - October became radicalised through its many violent confrontations with the state. Their numbers were swollen by pissed-off workers angry at the cost of the imminent Olympic Games. Ten days before the Games were due to open, around five hundred students were killed and 2,500 wounded in the Tlatelolco massacre. The army attack, which has been marked every year since by demonstrations, finally blew the lid off the PRI's claims to revolutionary legitimacy. It also damaged the party-state in more concrete ways: traditionally unconcerned about using clubs and bullets against workers and peasants, the PRI now found itself shooting down privileged students - its natural constituency for reproducing itself.

Many students, though, were brought back 'within budget' after a time in prison. Those who had moved beyond a criticism of the PRI to a wider criticism of capitalism were forced out of Mexico City to towns and cities that carried less personal risk. For those being actively pursued by the state, this meant disappearing into Mexico's vast hinterlands. There is a direct lineage from the Tlatelolco massacre to the many guerrilla groups that appeared in the rural margins in the early 1970s. Tainted by the militarist ideology of [Che Guevara](#) or Mao, these were all smashed with the help of the CIA by 1975.

The early 1970s - economic crisis

And there was a new problem. The economic boom stemming from the industrialisation process and the PRI employment protection racket, which had partly offset the traditional role of the reserve army of unemployed, meant the nationalised industries were severely overmanned and inefficient, and run by an entrenched working class accustomed to relatively high wages.

They say that when America sneezes, Mexico catches a cold. Now mired in its own economic crisis, America in the early 1970s was taking Mexico down with it. As capital increasingly freed itself from national boundaries, transforming itself into highly mobile finance capital,

investment flooded away from the industrial heartlands of both North America and Mexico to the Pacific Rim economies.

The recession gave the Mexican bosses less scope for conceding the above-inflation wage rises that had headed off trouble in the past. As a result the negotiating position of the charros was considerably weakened. With the ideals - and repression - of the student movement fresh, the working class, particularly from 1973, began a series of strikes, go-slows and demonstrations. Just like 1959, their demands were over wages and the removal of corrupt union leaders. The movement organised new unions outside the CTM and formed currents of resistance within it. The fact that the workers had often to physically fight the charros and their goons, who sometimes used the tools of disappearance and assassination, meant that the CTM could easily and visibly be identified as the enemy. While few workers seem to have used this as an opportunity from which to develop criticism of wage-labour there can be no doubt that the mid '70s strike movement increased both the self-confidence of the Mexican working class, and the sense of their being a distinct class in opposition to the capitalists.

The movement reached its height in 1976. The radical electricians' union, who had brought together new unions, urban squatter groups, and peasant organisations to form the 'National Front of Labour, Peasant and Popular Insurgency', now called a national strike. The administration responded by sending the army to occupy every electrical installation in Mexico. This was only the most visible of the many acts of repression which pushed the new labour militancy into defeat.

The state also responded with massive social spending. Foreign investment, however, was flooding out of Mexico. Moreover, state expenditure on unproductive industries staffed by rebellious workers was never going to solve the crisis of accumulation. Then an unexpected and propitious discovery gave the bosses room to manoeuvre - oil.

Oil boom - and bust

As a result of the oil boom, the economy was growing at around 8% by the end of the 1970s. Not only had the discovery of new petroleum deposits pulled Mexico out of the recession that had begun in 1973, the growth and subsequent wage rises had served to head off the snowballing class struggle.

The oil still in the ground off the Yucatan peninsula and in Chiapas was used as collateral for huge loans from abroad. Western banks, stuffed with surplus petrodollars as a result of the OPEC oil price hike eagerly lent out these vast sums to Mexico and many other 'Third World' nations. The loans were used to cover both the trade and the budget deficits.

The bosses assumed the price of oil would continue to rise, as it had done since 1973: the extent of their loans was predicated on future oil revenue. However, the price of oil dropped sharply after 1979. Coupled with rising interest rates that pushed the external debt ever higher, Mexico in 1982 was unable to keep to its scheduled repayments. By then, the nation owed \$92.4 billion, the third largest international debt after the US and Brazil. In August of that year, Mexico triggered the international debt crisis by declaring a moratorium on its repayments. In so doing it brought the international banking system to the edge of collapse. Western banks were soon refusing loans of any kind to the whole of Latin America which was consequently plunged into a decade-long recession.

In a desperate attempt to stem the haemorrhaging of capital, the then-President Lopez Portillo in almost his final act nationalised the banks. In so doing he followed firmly in the tradition of PRI economic nationalists who blame foreign, and especially US, capital of bleeding their country dry. In fact the bank nationalisation was the last time the economic nationalist card was be played with any real content.

The Lost Decade

1982-1992 is sometimes called the 'Lost Decade' in Mexico. The story is a familiar one: having to go to the IMF for money to keep the economy afloat, the PRI found themselves obliged to roll the state back from the arena of capital. This meant bringing the budget deficit under control, removing state subsidies to industry and agriculture, and lowering wages in order to stem the runaway inflation which had been fuelled by the oil mirage. State enterprises were privatised by the fistful, usually offloaded at below market value to PRI cronies. And 1986 saw Mexico finally joining GATT (the World Trade Organisation's Free Trade Agreement) after years of protectionism: many companies went bankrupt as a result.

In December 1987 the Economic Solidarity Pact was signed by representatives of government, union leaders and business. Restraint in wage demands and price controls on consumer goods was agreed. The Pact was nothing less than an attempt to preserve the social fabric so that restructuring could go ahead unfettered, though a new workers' offensive could have wrecked it.

Unfortunately the terrain of struggle had changed. While the struggle for autonomy in the 1970s had ended at the time of the oil boom, capital was now in a much less expansive position. If the crisis of accumulation was to be solved restructuring was essential. The offensive anti-charro struggles of the working class now became purely defensive and economic. As plants were closed or privatised, workers made redundant or had their wages lowered, the struggle oriented itself around sectional bread-and-butter issues, which engendered fragmentation. Better-paid CTM workers were still relatively protected, and the 1970s generation of charros were consequently in a much more credible position to mediate struggle. And if the situation became desperate, there was always the allure of the US border for the desperate proletarian.



Devastation - the Mexico City earthquake of 1985

Two moments from the 1980s indicate, however, that overt class antagonism had not vanished from the Mexican landscape. The first is to be found in the weeks following the devastation caused by the 1985 Mexico City earthquake. With the government paralysed, the residents of Mexico City's barrios formed themselves, initially, into rescue and medical teams, and shortly thereafter into community groups. These groups both rebuilt houses and prevented the incursions of landlords, many of whom wished to use the earthquake as an excuse to evict their tenants and rebuild the neighbourhoods with luxury housing at luxury

prices. From these autonomous working class formations came a network of self-help groups.[\[3\]](#)

A more dissipated, but nevertheless important, response to the austerity programme was the Presidential election of 1988. Cuauhtemoc Cardenas, a renegade PRI politician, stood against the PRI - and 'won'. Soon afterwards he formed the PRD, now the 'official' left opposition in Mexico. The PRD is very much old school PRI: for state intervention, increased welfare, a measure of land redistribution, against GATT and NAFTA (the North American Free Trade Agreement). Prior to 1988, the PRI had only to manage electoral fraud on a gubernatorial level. The Cardenas challenge was so unexpected and so overwhelming that the party-state panicked and fixed the results in the crudest possible manner. Mexico City was immediately alive with anti-PRI demonstrations. The TV screens showing the polling percentages had simply gone blank for hours, and mountains of votes marked for Cardenas were found piled on the Distrito Federal's rubbish tips or floating down Mexico's waterways.

Elections in Mexico are a world away from elections in the West. PRIistas are usually present in gangs around the ballot boxes, and refusal to vote the right way could mean losing a job, having your child barred from school or simply being given a beating. Thus a refusal to vote PRI is not taken lightly, and is much more likely to occur after discussions and agreement with friends and neighbours. This need to come together collectively immediately and paradoxically raises the possibility of a world beyond "democracy".

The Tequila Effect and beyond

With cheap American commodities just over the border, Mexico is adept at sucking in goods from abroad, leading to periodic crises in the balance of payments which have usually been solved by devaluing the peso. The peso was overvalued in 1994 - but everyone assumed the PRI had sufficient foreign currency reserves to protect it. In fact these reserves had fallen from \$33bn in February to only \$2.5bn in December, money which had been used to cover the yawning balance of payments deficit. Such a dramatic erosion also shows just how quickly the relatively protected Mexican market was opened up by NAFTA. On the 20th of December, the new Zedillo administration announced a one-off devaluation of 15%. Panicked foreign investors scrambled to get out of both pesos and Mexico. The PRI used the last of its foreign currency reserves to bolster the peso, but two days later it was forced to float the currency on the markets, where it dropped 40% against the dollar.

With the dollar such an important factor in Mexico - companies and the government generally having their loans denominated in dollars - the devaluation now meant the debt burden in the economy had risen massively. International debt default seemed once again to be on the cards. And what was being called the Tequila Effect could spread - for Latin America, only recently recovered from the years of international finance isolation that had resulted from the 1982 default, this would be nothing short of catastrophic. Despite the isolationists in Washington, a \$50bn rescue package was put together by the US and IMF, specifically to service short-term debt. In March 1995 the PRI announced an austerity programme that included a 10% cut in government spending, increased VAT, fuel and electricity price rises and imposed credit restraints.

Meanwhile, with interest rates soaring at 120%, many businesses and mortgage-owners were unable to keep up their repayments, despite a new government subsidy for the better-off. Seven banks collapsed and needed rescuing by the government. The true cost of this bailout only became apparent in 1999 - \$93bn, nearly 20% of GDP! This debt, which is accruing 18% yearly interest, and which the PRI hid from public accounts could cause the Mexican capitalist class trouble yet again.



Zapatista rebels in Chiapas

The response of the working class to this austerity package was determined by the depth of the recession that followed. Unlike 1987, the CTM refused to sign an economic pact with the government and business. Consequently there was no official policy of wage restraint during this crucial time. But the refusal to endorse austerity was hardly in response to a militant working class movement within the CTM tent. Rather it was because, their social base undermined by privatisation, the CTM now found itself in much stiffer competition with independent unions and was compelled to posture a little more credibly. Neither, however, were the independent unions arenas of militant anti-austerity. Shocked by the scale of the 1995 recession - one million out of work, another four million working less than fifteen hours a week - the working class was unable to move beyond the fragmentation wrought by the economy and which the trade union form accepts. Furthermore, the PRI's targeted anti-poverty programme PRONASOL, which had come into being as a result of the 1988 election shock, offset some of the very worst effects of the recession. Within the peasantry, however, there was stiffer resistance to the new neoliberalism, particularly in Chiapas where the new [Zapatista Army of National Liberation, EZLN](#), burst onto the scene on January 1st, 1994 – the day of the introduction of NAFTA. Today the Zapatistas remain in control of an autonomous region containing about 300,000 people.

The recession has vigorously restructured sectors of the Mexican economy. The competitive edge that the devaluation gave to Mexican exports has been sustained. Oil, once such a key export, now accounts for only 10% of the country's export base. It is this export-led recovery that the capitalist class see as the fruit of the restructuring that has been taking place since the late 1980s, and which superficially appears to be as a result of NAFTA. For the working class, real wages have still not reached their pre-devaluation levels. More wage cuts and job insecurity is on the way as the privatisation bandwagon judders on and the old social contract is further destroyed.

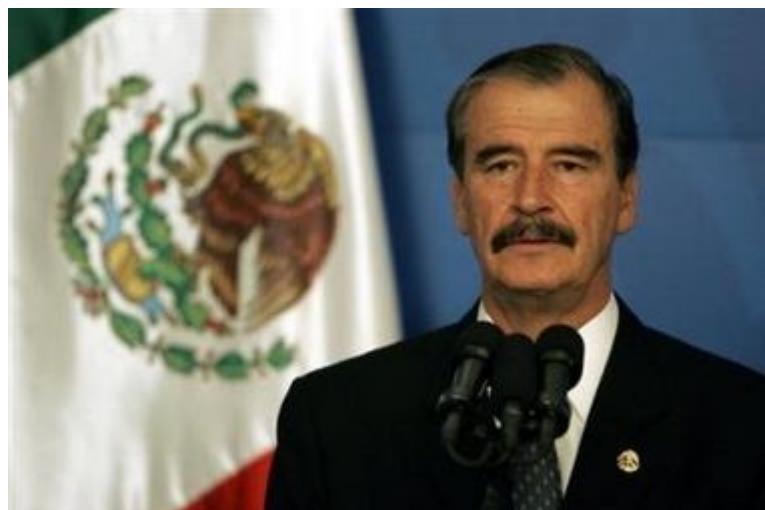
The swift economic recovery from 1995 showed how successfully the PRI had reinvented itself as a party of neoliberal economics. They did not attempted to spend their way out of trouble, as they have done in the past. Instead they inflicted the harshest of free market medicines on the population. By stealing their policies, the PRI seemingly marginalised the PAN. Two related contradictions now beset the PRI however. The first was that with the opening up of Mexico to trade liberalisation, and the subsequent deluge of American commodities, the PRI could no longer bang the ideological drum of economic nationalism with any coherence. This may not have been a problem: the Mexican bourgeoisie have

decades of practice at appearing to be masters of their own fate while having huge sections of their economy subordinated to the interests of American capital.

The second contradiction was more serious. By so dramatically reducing the size of the state sector, the party-state inevitably curtailed its own ability to dispense patronage and do favours.^[4] The question for the PRI became: how successful could it be at maintaining its traditional network of influence and power, a network born out of a corrupt and state-led economy, in the face of the new competitiveness the free market demanded.

2000: Mexico and the fall of the PRI

After seventy-one years the PRI has lost the Presidency and with it national power in Mexico. Despite getting up to all their old tricks in the run-up to the July 2nd poll - the Michoacan governor was caught plotting to divert state funds into election bribes, and in the state of Quintana Roo the PRI were even giving away free washing-machines - and despite the fact that the much heralded independent Federal Electoral Institute was controlled by the party-state, Vicente Fox, the leader of the PAN received 43% of the vote. The shock came in the PRI conceding defeat so swiftly. This time around, they lacked the political stomach for arranging the vast fraud needed to switch defeat to victory.



Victorious - the PAN's Vicente Fox

Why did the PRI lose? The simple answer is corruption. After so many years of institutionalised venality the electorate finally found a sturdy enough opposition bandwagon upon which to jump. On a broader level, it is now apparent just how far the PRI's traditional networks of power were undermined by the economic restructuring - and particularly the privatisations - of the 1980s and 90s. Their irony is that, having propelled Mexico out of its old economic protectionism, they themselves have not survived the transition. Just as the Porfiriato was compelled eventually to assault its own social base in the years before the Revolution, so the PRI through its economic reforms has attacked its social base - the peasants and the working class.

This article was edited by libcom from an extract of the [A Commune in Chiapas?](#) In *Aufheben* #9 which contains much more information about the EZLN. We have attempted to shorten and simplify the article somewhat and apologise for any resultant distortions. For the interested reader we recommend reading the full version [here](#)

Footnotes

1. Until 1964 the bracero programme allowed Mexicans to enter the US for seasonal agriculture work. Once there they were invariably treated as slaves and unwittingly kept the American worker's wages down. The border has long served as a safety valve for the discontent of Mexico's workers and peasants, a valve that both US and Mexican bourgeoisies are more than happy to keep open, whatever their rhetoric.
2. The best account of this we can find in English is in Chapter 20 of *Mexico, Biography of Power* by Enrique Krauze (Harper Collins, 1998).
3. A good example is neighbourhood of Tepito, as described in ['The Uses of an Earthquake'](#) by Harry Cleaver, again in [Midnight Notes](#), 9.
4. A good example of the way in which privatisation policies have undermined the PRI's social base is on the railways. Since the selling off of the rail network and subsequent redundancies and pay cuts, the PRI-controlled railworkers' union has lost more than 70% of its members. As a result the Charros have found their funds slashed and their influence eroded.